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What is This?
Uneven and Combined Development in World History: The International Relations of State-formation in Premodern Iran

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IR’s turn towards historical sociology is yet to overcome its ahistoricism. This lack of world-historical perspective, particularly conspicuous in relation to the non-European world, and arguably IR’s emergence as a discipline, can be traced back to the theoretically fateful negligence of ‘the international’ by the classical (historical) sociology on which the contemporary critiques of the mainstream IR theory tend to draw. This article develops this argument within the context of a theoretical re-appraisal of the traditional approaches to the problematics of the premodern state in Iran and proposes an alternative theoretical framework that is critically drawn on Trotsky’s theory of uneven and combined development as an internationally augmented historical materialism. Thus it argues that central to the premodern state-formation in Iran were the nomadic geopolitical pressure upon, and rule over, the agrarian Iranian society which gave rise to a synergetic nomadic-sedentary relationship mediated by, and crystallized in, the military-administrative institution of uymaq. This underlay the continuous formation, disintegration and re-production of successive states characterized by centralized patrimonial arbitrary rule.

KEY WORDS ♦ amalgamated state-formations ♦ geopolitics ♦ international ♦ mode of production ♦ nomadism ♦ uneven and combined development ♦ uymaq

The inability of Westphalia-based IR theory to understand premodern international relations has become an open secret (Buzan and Little, 2000, 2002). This lack of world-historical perspective has been further highlighted by powerful challenges, albeit from different viewpoints, to the idea of the Westphalian states system in Europe itself (e.g. Krasner, 2001; Ruggie,
1993; Spruyt, 1994; Teschke, 2002, 2003). It is this growing consciousness of a historical lacuna in International Relations theory, in Neorealism in particular, that underlies the turn within IR towards historical sociology over the last two decades (Hobden, 1998; Hobden & Hobson, 2002; Jarvis, 1989). Yet despite the barrage of critiques inspired by historical sociology Neorealism-dominated IR seems to have sustained no fatal injuries. For central to Neorealism’s curious blend of structural a-historicity and theoretical resiliency is arguably its a-social concept of ‘the international’: the social world’s immutable constitution by multiple, coexisting human communities. Ultimately it is this conceptual shield that historical sociological critiques of IR have failed to penetrate sociologically. Indeed with some notable exceptions (e.g. Rosenberg, 1994; Teschke, 2003), they tend to adopt the same a-social conceptualization, ‘thickened’ or otherwise, as their starting point (e.g. Buzan et al., 1993).² Pleas for taking on board the interrelation of the ‘levels of analysis’, ‘international structure’s sectoral differentiation’, ‘unlikeness’ of the units and so forth in order to overcome Neorealist a-historicism all set out from an ontological distinction between the international and the internal which is sustained precisely by this prior a-social conception of the international. Of course historical sociologists customarily assert the totality of the social world that also subsumes the international (e.g. Hobden, 2002: 43). But such formal assertions have not been accompanied by specific social theories that substantively and conceptually consummate this logical subsumption. As a result, IR’s assimilation of the insights and concepts of historical sociology has so far failed to effectively jettison Neorealism’s dictum concerning the irreducibility of the international to the social so entrenched in IR (Rosenberg, 2006). Meanwhile harassed and harried but undeterred, Neorealism has continued to project its invisible ‘third image’ while holding off the critics with its Damocles Sword of ‘reductionism’ hanging from its metaphysical structure of the international (Waltz, 1979); it pre-empts the final assault in the first instance.

The longevity of Neorealism’s theoretical edifice, despite historical sociology’s successive assaults, should draw our diagnostic attention in another direction: historical sociology — and its heritage in Classical Social Theory — itself. For as Justin Rosenberg (2006) forcefully argues, the tradition of Classical Social Theory has a curious relation with the international: it has recognized the influence of the international on the process of social development but never theorized, in any meaningful way, those influences as organic to that historical process itself. Thus it renders, even if unwittingly, the international a contingent element, an appendage to internalist sociological modes of explanation (cf. Teschke, 2005). Indeed it is precisely this theoretical degradation of the international by Classical Social Theory which has enabled IR to take theoretical ownership of the international and in the process remove it further
away from the domain of social theory. Thus IR’s claim to disciplinary identity
and autonomy is precisely based on this assumed theoretical incommensur-
ability of international and social and political theories. The theoretical mar-
ginality that the international suffers in social theory is attested to by the fact
that historical sociology’s ‘brought-back-in’ state, deployed within IR, was
reconstructed through the injection of a significant amount of international
(particularly geopolitical) conceptual substance (Mann, 1986; Skocpol, 1979;
Evans et al., 1985; Tilly, 1975).

What is to be done? Well, the prospect is not as bleak as one would infer
from the foregoing sketch of IR and historical sociology. In fact the basic con-
cepts of an ‘international historical sociology’ are already available in Leon
Trotsky’s remarkable, but hitherto insufficiently appreciated, theory of ‘uneven
and combined development’ (Rosenberg, 2006; cf. Rosenberg, 1996). It is
this theory which I attempt to critically apply to the structure of the
premodern Iranian state in this article. In choosing medieval Iran I pursue
three main objectives. First, extant approaches to the premodern Iranian state
are to a considerable extent informed by Classical Social Theories (primarily
various strands of Marxism). In showing their inability to account for the speci-
icity of the premodern Iranian state and its dynamic formation, I therefore
elaborate on and reinforce the claim regarding the international lacuna in
Classical Social Theories. This in turn strengthens the argument for the neces-
sity for a shift from social critiques of international theory to an international
critique of social theory. Second, Trotsky formulated his theory of uneven and
combined development in order to explicate and conceptualize the specifi-
cities of development and revolutionary change in Russia (and other ‘backward’
countries in general) in the capitalist epoch. While he derives his empirical
and political conclusions from a much older pattern of uneven and combined
development, covering most of Russia’s premodern history, the nature and
specific outcomes of precapitalist uneven and combined development receive
much less theoretical articulation and conceptual distinction in his works.
Thus in analysing a premodern state I also attempt to redress this theoretical
shortcoming, hence enhancing the theory’s analytical reach and conceptual
tools. Third, at an analytical level, historical sociological approaches to the
formation and transformation of premodern states have primarily focused
on Europe (e.g. Teschke, 2003; Tilly, 1975, 1992). Those studies which have
dealt with the extra-European world have either pursued macro-analysis of
‘international systems’, without offering in-depth analysis of any particular
state (e.g. Buzan and Little, 2002), or they have focused on the changing
configuration of anarchical and hierarchical relations within and between
western and non-western international systems or geo-cultural areas (Hobson
and Sharman, 2005; Hobson, 2004). My focus on Iran therefore seeks to
contribute to the closure of this analytical gap too.

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The remainder of this article is divided into five main sections. In the first section I shall introduce the broader question of premodern eastern polities within which I situate the specific problem of the premodern Iranian state. I shall show that Marxist theoretical approaches, that dominate these debates in the case of Iran, are primarily concerned with epochal differentiation through a methodologically comparative strategy of categorization in terms of different modes of production — an approach that ultimately leaves the nature of premodern societies of Asia (including Iran) described but unexplained. This, I shall reiterate, is essentially the outcome of the geopolitical insensitivity of their theoretical frameworks, derived from an internationally insulated ontology. In the second section, I outline Trotsky’s theory of uneven and combined development, showing that it is characterized by its conceptualization of the international as a causal dimension of the socio-historical process itself. In the third section, I examine the socio-political specificities of nomadism whose interaction with and impact on premodern Iranian state-formation is central to my argument. In the fourth section, I attempt to operationalize my approach, based on uneven and combined development, applying it to the premodern Iranian state. I highlight the international dimension of premodern state-formation in Iran, which consisted of a continuous geopolitical interaction between Turkish nomadism and Iran’s primarily sedentary society. This process, I argue, led to a specific synthesis characterized by centralized and personified arbitrary rule, whose mutated forms have continued to mark the Iranian state to the present day. Finally, I conclude by sketching some broader theoretical implications of this analysis.

Limits of Monadic Sociology: Eastern ‘Exception’ and Problems of Mode of Production Analysis

Modern western societies are characterized by a differentiation of social space into a public political sphere of the state and a private economic sphere of ‘civil society’ (Wood, 1981). This formal separation imparts to these societies their historically unique feature of permitting a process of surplus accumulation which does not require direct political intervention in the process of production. This in turn both generates and permits the coexistence of political equality with economic inequality. The resulting form of sovereignty allows an international structure of appropriation and domination comprising formally equal states presiding over unequal societies; an ‘empire of civil society’ (Rosenberg, 1994). This unique developmental path in the West is often explained in terms of the antecedent political fragmentation of west-European feudalism, which is said to have been causal in the eventual emergence of capitalist relations and the bourgeois-democratic states to which they gave rise (e.g. Anderson, 1974: 402–5; Weber, 1992 [1930]). Debates on the precise nature of this epoch-making process still continue. There is, for instance,
a growing body of literature, associated with the work of Robert Brenner, which challenges the classical Marxist accounts of the rise of capitalism and focuses on the variegated character of European development (Brenner, 1977, 1988, 1989). Here the divergent trajectories of European development are explained in terms of crystallization of specific ‘social property relations’ as a result of unintended different outcomes of ‘class struggle’. Based on this ‘political Marxist’ approach, ‘modernity’ of the French absolutist state and Westphalian states system (Teschke, 2003) and the causes of French Revolution (Comninel, 1990) have all been challenged. The theoretical differences between this more recent Marxist approach and classical Marxism cannot be dealt with here. What is significant is that while they diverge on the question of the precise nature of capitalist transformation they converge on the exclusiveness of this process to Europe and the causes of the Eastern difference.

So how was this Eastern specificity actually explained in the classical accounts? Here I shall focus on Marxist approaches since they inform most of the theoretically explicit treatments of premodern Iran. Marx theorized pre-capitalist Asia, and by implication Iran, in terms of the Asiatic mode of production whose state-form, in turn, corresponded to the pre-Marxist notion of ‘Oriental despotism’ (e.g. Marx, 1990: 479, 1993: 472–3). Later, however, Soviet Iranologists considered precapitalist Iran as a feudal society whose various forms ranged from the ‘incipient feudalism of the Sassanids’, the ‘underdeveloped feudalism’ of the Caliphates’ period, the feudalism proper of the Seljuqs and the ‘nomadic feudalism’ of the post-Mongol period (Ashraf, 1970: 309). A third, more recent, Marxist approach maintains that both Asiatic and feudal modes existed in ‘oriental’ societies in an ‘articulated’ form, with the Asiatic mode dominating the feudal (e.g. Wickham, 1987).

None of these accounts, however, adequately explains the specific form of the premodern Iranian state. First, the concept of ‘articulation of modes of production’ fails to specify the concrete mechanism through which one mode’s domination over the other(s) occurs and is reproduced. Second, the concept of the Asiatic mode is hardly applicable to Iran since its concrete determinations — the state’s role in the ecologically necessitated large-scale irrigation works and non-stratified village communes — were empirically absent there (Lambton, 1953; Petrushevsky, 1968: 523). And finally the formally free status of the Iranian peasants (Vali, 1993: 70) and intense ‘patrimonial absolutism’ of the premodern Iranian states do not resemble the fragmented European feudalist polity characterized by the ‘juridical serfdom’ and ‘parcellized sovereignty’ (Anderson, 1974: 397, 407), generated by a constellation of overlapping juridico-political authorities cohering around a chain of lord–vassal relationships (Bloch, 1978: 142–8); ‘L’État, c’est moi!’ could have been said by any Iranian king; he was certainly no primus inter pares.
Let us now examine the mode of production approaches more closely. Marxist theory, then, classically conceptualizes precapitalist agrarian societies in terms of two different modes of production, namely Asiatic and feudal. But there is a major problem with this way of theorization. For precapitalist societies in both Europe and Asia rested, at their most basic level, on an agrarian economy based on small-scale peasant landholding. Moreover, in both societies the process of exploitation was based on extra-economic surplus-extraction. Yet at the state level European and Eastern precapitalist societies displayed sharp differences: fragmented sovereignty in feudal Europe stood in sharp contrast to the centralized and proto-territorial sovereignty of the East. This contrast was classically explained in terms of the form of the extracted peasant surplus, regarded as the determinant element of each mode of production. Feudal ‘rent’ was appropriated on the basis of feudal lords’ juridically sanctioned private (albeit conditional) property in land. Asian tax was, on the other hand, the expression of the absence of private property in land, hence based upon (formal) ownership of all lands by the state as the ‘supreme landlord’. The chain of mediation of surplus-extraction and its upward stream was, therefore, shorter and concomitantly the political authority was denser and more centralized.

The problem of substantive similarity but formal divergence of the feudal and Asiatic modes has given rise to a number of attempted resolutions. Soviet Marxism in the 1930s abandoned the Asiatic mode as inconsistent with Marx’s general concept of mode of production, which it considered as an essentially economic category (Dunn, 1982: 3; Hobsbawm, 1964: 61). Thus Asiatic societies were reconstrued as variants of feudalism since tax and rent were not conceived as fundamentally different economic categories. The difference between feudal and Asiatic modes was therefore attributed to the effects of particular ‘superstructural’ elements (Berktay, 1987: 312). The problem with this formal resolution is that the ‘economic primacy’ thesis presupposes the derivative nature of the political or superstructure leaving unanswered the question as to how different political forms or ‘superstructures’ can be derived from essentially similar economic ‘bases’ (cf. Anderson, 1974: 402–3).

But the classical concept of the feudal mode itself has been problematized on the grounds of its internal incoherence. The leading advocate of this approach in relation to premodern Iran is Abbas Vali (1993). Vali argues that in the conventional concept of feudal mode, too, it is only through the insertion of an external political (extra-economic surplus-extraction) moment that the nexus between forces and relations of production is secured (Vali, 1993: 31–2). Vali’s solution is to reconstruct the classical concept of feudal mode of production in the image of the capitalist mode as an essentially economic category. This can be done, he argues, through a reconstruction of the (juridico-political) concept of ‘ownership’ (of the land) to also include ‘control’ over it (Vali, 1993: 105). This
in turn reconstitutes the process of surplus-extraction as an economic exchange relation.

A critical treatment of Vali’s thesis is beyond the scope of this article. Here I only briefly sketch the main problems involved in his approach. Vali’s argument rests on a problematic, purely economic interpretation of the concept of capitalist mode of production. He overlooks the political foundation of the capitalist exchange relations that are laid through the prior violent political process of ‘primitive accumulation’ (Marx, 1990: ch. VIII) and sustained and reproduced through the active protection and enforcement of the institution of private property by the capitalist state. Vali’s self-declared purely internalist-sociological approach (1993: 91) ultimately produces a concept of ‘Iranian feudalism’ which curiously ‘does not entail a definition of the dynamics of Iranian feudalism, which would need to address the determination of the economic and political forces operating within and outside the feudal state apparatuses …’ (Vali, 1993: 227: my italics). Moreover Vali does not elaborate on his problematic contention regarding the simultaneous existence of ‘territorial centralism’ and fragmented sovereignty in premodern Iran (Vali, 1993: 230–1). Nor does he discuss the general but all important question of the state.

Still others have retained the conceptual distinction of the feudal and Asiatic modes by introducing the concept of ‘social formation’ as irreducible to ‘formal categories’ of mode of production (Wickham, 1987; cf. Althusser and Balibar, 1970; Foster-Carter, 1978). Here a precapitalist social formation can contain both feudal and Asiatic modes, albeit in a relation of domination and subordination. Eastern state-forms were said to be refracted through an asymmetric conjunction of (state) tax and (feudal) rent (where the former predominated), hence assuming their centralized forms (Wickham, 1987). Here the cardinal question is how the specific balance between tax and rent is concretely determined; it remains unanswered.

In contrast to the approaches surveyed above, Perry Anderson rejects the notion of mode of production as a purely economic category. He defines all precapitalist class-societies in terms of the interpenetration and co-constitution of the economic and the political (Anderson, 1974: 403–5). For Anderson, the specificity of European feudalism is the result of the legal codification of private property (of the feudal landlord) in land which is itself due to the impact of the juridical legacy of the Roman Empire. Thus, Anderson proposes a ‘typology of precapitalist modes’ (Anderson, 1974: 405) on the basis of the specific ‘superstructural’ elements which in each case ‘intervene directly in the internal nexus of surplus-extraction’ (Anderson, 1974: 403). But even if it is accepted that the difference of such juridical forms in the non-European social formations renders them modally distinct, the question of the reasons for their difference still requires an answer.
Remarkably, there are important materials for constructing precisely such an answer in Anderson’s own discussions of precapitalist European development. For he explains both the rise of European feudalism in general and its underdeveloped character in Eastern Europe in terms of the interaction of different modes of production. Thus, according to Anderson European feudalism emerged from the ‘catastrophic collision of two dissolving anterior modes of production [namely] primitive and ancient’ (Anderson, 2000: 128) while Eastern Europe’s arrested feudalization was the result of ‘nomadic brake’ (Anderson, 2000: 217–28). The underlying logic of these profound insights into the international dimension of social development, however, does not ramify into Anderson’s broader theoretical approach, which remains explicitly historical-sociological. Moreover, the empirical extension of Anderson’s argument is rather restrained. The causality of nomadic–sedentary interaction and the complexity of its impacts in Asia are not given the articulation they merit. For while Anderson regards ‘nomadic pall’ as ‘a recurrent background to the formation of the mediaeval [eastern Europe]’ (2000: 228), he tends to underestimate and undertheorize it in Asia. After all, ‘ransom of the geography’ (Anderson, 2000: 217) in Asia was much more exacting than Europe. Thus Anderson’s contention that no nomadic–sedentary ‘synthesis’ could occur (2000: 225) seems untenable. Indeed I argue that in Asia specific political nomadic–sedentary combinations did crystallize which are actually central to understanding the specificity of the Eastern state forms.

We have now traversed the full circle. We started with the question as to why premodern Eastern states (including Iran) were distinctly centralized even though political authority was not socially deep. The answers we surveyed did not improve much on Marx’s original answer: that this was due to the absence of private property in land. But why was there no private property in land? Marx ‘toyed for a moment with the hypothesis that [this] was first introduced into the Orient by Islamic conquest’ (Anderson, 1974: 482). But ultimately his answer was based on a Braudelian longue durée: the vastness and aridity of the Asian landmass, and the self-sufficient isolated nature of eastern village communities, endowed the state power (as the ‘higher unity’) with the ownership of all land (Marx, 1993: 472–3, 1973: 303).

Now the geographical specificity and its political corollary do not apply to Iran. But even if they did, from a historical perspective the specific sociopolitical forms which originally spring up from certain pre-given natural conditions cannot, within a longer time-frame, be reduced to or deduced from those conditions themselves: ‘historical development loosens the determining
influence of geography’ (Cox, 2000: 220). The crucial point is that real historical societies do not hermetically develop. Political coagulation of social relations at an intra-societal level should not warrant *sui generis* or merely comparative modes of analysis and theorization. The absence of *stable* and secure private property in agrarian land in Iran was to a considerable extent the outcome of its peculiar relation with nomadism to which I return below. But in order to conceptually grasp this process we cannot rely on a de-internationalized social theory; we need a *social* theory with causality of the international at its ontological heart. Leon Trotsky’s theory of ‘uneven and combined development’ possesses precisely such a quality. Let us look at it more closely.

**Uneven and Combined Development: Socialization of the International, Internationalization of the Social**

Trotsky’s theory of ‘uneven and combined development’ represents an ontological and methodical incorporation of the causality of the international dimension of the historical process of social development. First deployed to analyse modern capitalist development, it posits that social reality, on an international scale, always consists of the coexistence and interrelation of polities that are different in their levels of ‘development’; it is uneven. Unevenness entails the interaction of the constituting polities which in turn imparts a ‘combined’ nature to the developmental trajectory of a ‘backward’ society in the capitalist epoch. In order to preserve its independence the backward society, under the ‘whip of external necessity’, grafts onto its polity those material and non-material products of its more developed adversaries which it perceives as the source of their power. Crucially, this process takes place in the absence of the social relations which originally gave rise to these products in the more developed societies in an *organic* way. Thus the development of the ‘backward’ polity assumes a combined nature, meaning an ‘amalgamation of the archaic and more contemporary forms’. This in turn generates unstable socio-political structures that open up new possibilities and compulsions for revolutionary change. The resulting ‘revolution of backwardness’ would in turn react upon the more developed societies themselves, through international mediation, generating further socio-political convulsions with far-reaching geopolitical reverberations (cf. Matin, 2006). Unevenness and combination are, therefore, inherently *relational* conditions. Combined development assumes different forms depending on the nature and social texture of unevenness of which it is both a result and dynamic determinant. A radical social transformation within the context of unevenness (as a result of combined development) reconstitutes the structure of unevenness itself which in turn reconditions the subsequent processes of combined development in other geopolitical spaces.
The immediate context of Trotsky’s formulation of the theory of uneven and combined development was the nature of social transformation of a backward state, namely Tsarist Russia, in the capitalist epoch. He rejected the then widely held idea that Russia must inevitably go through its own prolonged bourgeois stage before transition to socialism. For such ‘cyclical history’ was, Trotsky argued, precluded by capitalism itself precisely because capitalist expansion is not only a vertical ‘national’ process but also a horizontal international process that entails the refraction of capitalist relations through the prisms of pre-existing uneven international space which in the capitalist era assumes the form of a nation-states system. In short, from Trotsky’s perspective uneven and combined development permanently subverted a universal or unilinear path of development in the capitalist epoch.

At a high level of abstraction uneven and combined development, therefore, conceptualizes the process and outcomes of the interaction of diachronically simultaneous yet historically a-synchronous polities. There is, however, a crucial aspect to this process. For as was pointed out above Trotsky was concerned primarily with the then pressing issue of Russia’s process of capitalist transformation and the revolutionary potentials latent in it. Thus he did not explicitly or systematically elaborate upon the different nature and outcomes of the process of uneven and combined development in the precapitalist epoch.

Modern uneven and combined development has a distinct character. The historically unique quality of capitalism, i.e. the organic tendency of its social relations toward expansion, necessitates much more than merely political or bureaucratic/administrative adjustments by the non-capitalist polities exposed to it. Rather non-capitalist polities are forced to undertake radical transformation of the fundamental social relations on which they rest. More specifically, capitalist combined development culminates in a drive for industrialization that entails a radical reconstitution of socioeconomic reproductive relations in all non-capitalist societies in the capitalist epoch. The concrete expression of this process is the expropriation of the direct producers in possession of their means of reproduction and their reconstitution as ‘free’ wage-labourers.

In the precapitalist epoch, by contrast, combined development occurs within an uneven international space which has not yet been transformed into an organic totality under the unifying (but not homogenizing) impact of capitalist sociality. That is, the interactive nature of unevenness does not entail fundamental transformation of the social fabric of the interacting polities; general reproductive processes do not undergo qualitative/internal change. Thus, accumulation continues to occur as a primarily quantitative/expansive process, as (geo)political accumulation.
This precapitalist form of combined development can appropriately be thought of in terms of a form of combined development which Justin Rosenberg conceptualizes as ‘general abstraction’ (Rosenberg, 2006: 319). It signifies the fact and consequences of the coexistence of developmentally differentiated but reproductively similar (non-capitalist) societies. These consequences, in my view, tended to manifest principally at the political level as ‘amalgamated state-formations’. By this I refer to a combination of different forms of authority (corresponding to different modes of socioeconomic organization) ruling over a particular geopolitical space within which they related to the (pre-existing) social reproductive texture without (necessarily) transforming its fabric, namely the actual process and organization of labour and/or the basic forms and mechanism of surplus-extraction. These remained essentially extra-economic.

Thus defined, the notion of amalgamated state-formations is the key to the question of diversity of the political structures of societies which are similar in their basic economic-productive structures, e.g. medieval Europe and Asia. And the principal theoretical point here is that these political forms, which originate from different, economically uneven geopolitical spaces, should not be seen as either theoretically or empirically exterior to the social reproductive relations they dominate and exploit. Otherwise they will elude a broader social theory of historical development and can only be recaptured through a separate theory of international relations. And this is precisely what that lies at the heart of classical sociology’s lack of an international dimension and — its result — the sociological poverty of international theory.

At this stage we can draw some more concrete conclusions. Since for all precapitalist societies land constitutes the fundamental condition of reproduction, at the inter-societal level ‘geopolitical accumulation’ (Teschke, 2003: 95–115) assumes a central place; a condition which directly generates military imperatives, both as an immediate condition of economic (re)production and as a means of augmenting the productive basis itself (Marx, 1993: 491).

Now the recognition of a positive relation between war and state-formation is perhaps one of the distinguishing features of historical sociology in IR. For instance, the impact of war on European state-formation has been argued for and meticulously documented by inter alia Charles Tilly (1975, 1992). He famously wrote, ‘war made the state, and the state made war’ (1975: 42). There are, however, some important differences between this approach and that of uneven and combined development which informs my argument. War for Tilly is not a dynamic shaper of the internal structure of warring polities in a synthetic manner. Rather it merely acts as an external ‘natural selector’. Tilly begins from an already existing variety of state-forms (empire, city-state and nation-state) whose (exclusively) war-mediated interaction leads to the elimination of the weaker (less efficiently accumulating) states. The surviving
‘nation-state’ subsequently becomes the globally prevalent state-form through Western imperialism and colonialism. This presupposition of the ‘nation-state’ on the one hand occludes the historicity of the nation-state as a historical political form itself. And on the other, it conceptually rules out possible syntheses of different state-forms in the course of their interaction. Tilly’s Darwinian evolutionary approach does not accommodate combined development. Moreover, in Tilly’s argument the notion of ‘international system’ as the arena of war-mediated state-building suffers from a problematic generality (cf. Hobden, 1998: 13). For Tilly tends to conflate the general interactive plurality of differentiated political communities with the anarchical international system as a historically specific form of this configuration; he equates unevenness with modern international relations.

Now let us return to the case of premodern Iran. The geopolitical dimension of the state-formation in the case of precapitalist Iran was primarily expressed in the almost unbroken geopolitical pressure of Turkish tribal nomadism on the Iranian sedentary society throughout its premodern history. My core argument is that the nomadic–agrarian interaction entailed a rather complex process of state-formation. It produced a specific, synergetic relationship between tribal nomadism and Iran’s primarily agrarian society, mediated by and crystallized in the military-administrative institution of the *uymaq*. It was this which resulted in the conspicuous absence of stable private property in land and the formation and continued reproduction of patrimonial-absolutist states.

More generally, any analysis of the structure of premodern Iran must, therefore, take into account three processes. First, the military exigencies generated by the specific form of nomadic warfare that weighed upon Iran’s sedentary society during the period of ‘armed peace’; second, the impact of the interpolation of social, military and politico-ideological features of tribal nomadism (corresponding to the specificities of its mode of production) into the Iranian polity following nomadic conquest; and third, the metamorphosis of the nomadic polity during the actual process of rule after the conquest. The latter comprises the specific dynamic of premodern state formation/disintegration in Iran. The first of these processes has been a general feature of most Asian polities throughout their premodern history. I therefore deal with the second and third processes in my empirical analysis of premodern Iran and deal with the first aspect in a general theoretical way in the following section on the specificities of nomadism.

**The Socio-political Specificities of Tribal Nomadism**

Nomadism can be defined as a form of society in which the producers’ subsistence needs were primarily — but not exclusively — met through the ‘intermediary of gregarious migratory flocks or herds under the management
of a human group’ (Lefébure, 1979: 1; cf. Chaudhuri, 1990: 263–4). The ever-present need for new grazing pastures in (semi) arid lands of the Eurasian steppe meant constant movement of the herds and therefore also of the herders, the nomads. This unique spatial mobility imparted to the pastoral nomadic groups social, political and organizational characteristics which formed the basis of their particular attitudes toward and relations with the sedentary societies — consequently inflecting the specific effects of their encounter.

The fact of constant movement, as the basis of the whole reproduction process, meant that nomads’ relations to land could not be one of ownership. Unlike their flocks, of which they could claim ownership, land appeared to the moving nomads simply as the ‘inorganic nature of their subjectivity’ (Marx, 1993: 472). Community to the nomads therefore appears to be ‘founded — prior to any form of productive activity — at a superstructural level’ (Lefébure, 1979: 4–5), i.e. shared ancestry, congenital association, common language, etc. By contrast, in the primitive agricultural communities it is the access to land and its cultivation that necessitates the constitution and membership of the village community. The so-called ‘Commune’ of the Germanic tribes, Marx notes, appears as a coming-together (Verinigung), not as a being-together (Verein) (1993: 483).

Nomadism is, therefore, structurally averse to forms of sovereignty and authority that are based on individual and private claims of ownership to land. The relation to land cannot be other than transitory access rights, realized through and mediated by the tribe. These ‘rights’ would be incarnated in the person of the tribal chieftain who represented the ‘higher unity’ of the lineage-segmented tribe. At an intertribal (confederative) level, this quality would be reincarnated in the person of the supreme chief or Khan, to whom other chieftains owed unconditional, albeit not necessarily permanent, allegiance.

The same conditions which rendered movement — or, more generally, ability to move — an integral aspect of the nomadic life endowed it, both at the individual and collective levels, with war-like traits and military virtues. As Marx writes, ‘war [becomes] … the great comprehensive task … which is required to occupy the objective conditions of being there alive, or to protect and perpetuate the occupation’ (Marx, 1993: 474). And this ‘material tour de force of nomadism’ necessitates the establishment of a ‘system of military readiness’ (Goldschmidt, 1979: 20) entailing both ‘a rigorously high standard of character and behaviour’ (Toynbee in Tomlin, 1978: 30) and the development of certain qualities and attitudes: military prowess, control and movement of animals, ability to endure danger and physical hardship, social manipulations, high status concern, low affect, and objectification of persons, etc.

Within this context the personal qualities of the tribal chieftain or nomadic leader acquire great importance. He tends to command intense obedience as
the ‘specific conditions of [nomadic] production [make] subjective forces of production appear as qualities of individuals’ (Marx in Rodinson, 1974: 63). Thus ‘pastoral religion focuses upon the individual; [a focus related to] the great importance of individual action … and relative unimportance of the geographical community’ (Goldschmidt, 1979: 19, 25, 24–7). In nomadic societies, the state was always ‘personified’ in the person of the Khan (Krader, 1979: 228). More generally, military skills and organization were factors and conditions of nomadic (re)production. Nomadic tribes resembled a ‘war machine’ constantly moving in the steppe’s ‘smooth space’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003: ch. 12).

The high mobility, predatory and war-attuned nature of nomadism were of the utmost importance in shaping the outcome and forms of the interrelation between the nomadic ‘extensive economy’ and the sedentary society’s ‘intensive economy’, revolving around the regulation of the exchanges between the two economies (Lattimore, 1951: 33). The mobility of the whole population and its property enabled the nomads to evade the imperial expeditions into the steppe, while the remarkable agility and manoeuvring power of the nomadic cavalry made it a formidable force in raiding, and under certain conditions, conquering the settled populations. Nonetheless the periods of peaceful coexistence and exchange were perhaps of much longer duration (Krader, 1979: 226; Wolf, 1997: 33) although this was sometimes secured through the payment of tribute by the empire to the nomads as in the case of the Chinese Empire and its Mongol neighbours (Tilly, 1992: 21). But generally nomadic states’ accumulation was based on a ‘strategy of extortion to gain trade rights and subsidies’ from the sedentary state. And this could be maintained only if there existed a functional sedentary state to extract from in the first place (Barfield, 1989: 9). But the very scope and tension-prone nature of these relations and the asymmetry between their extent and regulatory means rendered exchange mechanisms structurally unstable (Krader, 1979: 232–34). The point is that the preconditions of a belligerent relation between the nomadic society and the adjacent settled populations were latent in the nature of the social whole constituted by the interacting nomadic and sedentary societies.

The timing of the bursting of this condition into open warfare was contingent upon certain factors such as a ‘push-off’ effect of the occasional increase in aridity of pastures and/or a ‘pull-out’ effect of internal disintegration of sedentary societies (Toynbee in Lattimore, 1962: 242; cf. Chaudhuri, 1990: 265). To these, the occasional internal disorganization of the sedentary state as a result of rebellions or intra-ruling class struggles should also be added. Yet when any of these tipping effects occurred it was always economically less costly for the nomads (Barfield, 1989: 9), hence their stronger tendency toward war-mediated accumulation. This compelled the sedentary polities interacting with the nomadic entities to establish a similar military
organization through centralization of war (and therefore economic) resources. This process necessarily entailed the concentration of political power and a reduction in the layers of political authority (cf. Gellner, 1983: 21). It tended to replicate (unwittingly) the nomadic political structure, especially its personified, centralized and arbitrary form of authority.11

After the actual nomadic conquest, this process assumed a more pronounced but also more complex character. For now the nomadic organizational units of the period of ‘armed peace’ were directly superimposed on the sedentary polity and entered a direct relation with the socioeconomic structure of the agrarian polity. The central mediator and backbone of the new combined polity in Iran was *nymaq*: the distinct nomadic institution at the heart of the nomadic–sedentary synthesis which, as we shall now see, underpinned the specific premodern state-form in Iran.

Nomadism and the Structure of Premodern Iranian Polity

For almost two millennia Turkic steppe nomads were not only Iran’s but all of Eurasia’s nemesis. They rendered a vast region stretching from Manchuria to the Ukraine a ‘zone of turbulence’ (Chaliand, 2004: xi). In fact it was not until the 17th century, when the territorial expansionism of Manchu and Muscovite ‘gunpowder empires’ interlocked, that the nomadic threat (based on mounted archery) was neutralized. And with the blockage of their south-Oxianic valve of the Iranian plateau by the aspirant Safavid state (1501–1722) — itself nomadic in origin — steppe nomadism as an international force was finally subdued and forced into its geopolitical decomposition. In fact, the strength and reach of this nomadic whip makes one rethink Halford Mackinder’s depiction of the geopolitics of the premodern world as being essentially one of opposition between ‘sea empires and continental empires’ in terms of an opposition between ‘nomads and settled peoples’ (Chaliand, 2004: 2). And it is the fighting out of this opposition both intra- and internationally, that constitutes one of the main ways in which the process of uneven and combined development proceeded and produced its impact on premodern Iran. I shall return to the concrete socio-political outcomes of this opposition shortly; but first, a brief overview of Iran’s pre-Mongol polity is in order.

Islam was the outcome of a fusion of ‘tribal society, the monotheistic religious mentality, with religious community and trading confederacy and political organization …’ (Lapidus, 1999: 35–6). Given this tribal social fabric, Arab Muslims had not developed any particular law or legal framework for dealing with land and especially cultivable land as such. In fact the ‘vagueness and uncertainty of Islamic law in matters of real estate’ to which Anderson (1974: 425) refers has its material roots precisely in this desert-nomadism of early Muslim conquerors.
This explains why, after conquering Iran (636–51), they simply upheld the pre-Islamic Sassanid land regime. Muslim jurists later derived from the Quran the idea of ownership of all lands by God and thus by implication by his deputy on earth, i.e. the Caliph, or any extant Muslim sovereign (Løkkgaard, 1950: 38). Thus in its formative period the Islamic land regime was rather simple. There was kharaj (land tax) applying to those who ‘owned’ the land, i.e. the upper class of pre-Islamic dihqans whose rights were nonetheless revocable at the Caliph’s will. The non-Muslim subjects had to pay an extra tax called jizia (poll-tax) in return for their security and protection under Muslim rule. The customary arrangements for peasants’ access to land remained generally unchanged.

As a result, instead of a vertical chain of ‘vassalage’ ties, a circular structure emerged at the centre of which was the supreme sovereign to whom each regional ruler was subordinated. No multi-layered structure of sovereignty emerged. But the Caliphate had to deal with the question of the maintenance of its military structure. This was solved through the iqta system, or the grant of right of tax-revenue collection to the military commanders that reached a peak under the Seljuqs (1055–1194). This configuration was further developed under the long reign of the post-Mongol Turkish rulers of Iran, and was most strikingly represented by the nomadic institution of uymaq. The uymaq system was dialectically constitutive of both the centrifugal tendencies within the medieval Iranian polity and its centralized-patrimonial character. So let us look more closely at this system.

With the Mongol invasion under Chingiz Khan and with its second wave under Timur-i Lang, uymaqs as distinctly nomadic political-administrative units were consolidated in Iran. They reached their fully developed form under the Safavids. Uymaqs did not merely represent territories assigned for tax-collection to particular nomadic tribes. Nor can they be equated with any nomadic tribe or pastoral community as such (Babayan, 1996: 136; cf. Reid, 1978, 1979). Uymaqs, especially under the early Safavids, resembled mini-states or ‘household-states’ (Lapidus, 1999: 283). They exerted political and administrative authority within relatively well-defined territories whose population (both urban and rural) could not rival them militarily. The continuity of this military superiority was due to the fact that uymaqs continued their nomadic way of life, reproducing all the military qualities and resources associated with nomadism. For this was rightly seen as the real basis of the uymaq’s (or rather its aristocracy’s) political supremacy and economic privileges locally and its bargaining power vis-á-vis the ‘central’ state ‘nationally’. Thus each uymaq’s ruling household taxed the local peasantry (and urban mercantile bourgeoisie) often, but not always, by royal appointment, in return for partaking in ‘national’ defence or external expeditions. This was codified in the institution of iqta (Khazanov, 1992: 85). But it was not
unusual for the royal sanction to be merely formal as the government faced a *fait accompli* which it was either unable or reluctant to tamper with. The shahs were often ‘the suzerains over a society dominated on the local level by *uymaqs*’ (Lapidus, 1999: 283). This military-territorial local government normally had its base in a citadel or fortress, but its chiefs maintained residences and compounds in other cities and towns in Iran (Reid, 1978: 120).

Superficially, the *uymaq* may therefore resemble a feudal fief. Yet there are important differences between them which also underlie the specific form of the overall Iranian premodern polity in contradistinction to European feudalism. The *uymaq*, as an essentially nomadic socio-political organism, never fully and/or voluntarily assimilated into its predominantly agricultural-sedentary social matrix; rather it remained superimposed upon, and in later times juxtaposed to, it. In fact it thrived and was reproduced through this very form of non-sedentary, military-attuned life (cf. Khazanov, 1992: 84). Neither the rank and file herdsmen of the *uymaq* nor its chieftains and aristocracy integrated organically into the agricultural production process in any significant way. The *uymaq* merely pumped out the surplus produced by the juridically and legally free peasants. And as such it had an utterly political foundation based on intense internal relations of personal dependency of lineage and kinship. The *uymaq*’s ruling stratum, even if urban based, would consciously maintain and attempt to reproduce those relations within the *uymaq* as this was its basis of political power in its outward relations with the state, with other *uymaqs*, the peasants and other groups within its dominion. And it did so simply because its privileged socio-political status, based on its disproportionate share of peasant-produced surplus, and also significant revenues accrued from the taxation of the urban mercantile class, were precisely based on its military organization, resources and skills; traits which, of course, accounted for (and were always remembered for) the original nomadic conquest (cf. Chaudhuri, 1990: 267).

Here the question of class struggle arises. Generally in the East, as Trotsky noted, ‘the process of social differentiation was diluted by the process of expansion … [expansive economy meant] formlessness of class relations …’ (1985: 25). In Iran’s case, nomadic conquest played no small part in this process. For the foreignness of the ruling nomads inflated the ethnic dimension of exploitation, while their military superiority rendered the possibility of any effective resistance by the dispersed and disorganized peasantry very slim indeed (cf. Hall, 1988: 30). In fact one of the pillars of the ‘despotic’ state’s legitimacy was the recurrent appeal of the peasantry and urban mercantile class to the state for protection against the predatory actions of the nomads against whom they had little possibility of active resistance.

Peasant passivity was further accentuated by the ‘social mobility’ entailed in Islam’s ‘libertarianism’, whereby the peasants were unattached to land hence
their ability to leave their local area as and when the exploitation became unbearable (Chaqueri, 2001: 37; Nomani, 1976: 129). This also provided an inbuilt mechanism of mitigating peasant exploitation via self-restraint on the part of the semi-landlords fearing peasant exodus (cf. Chaudhuri, 1990: 268). At the same time, Islam’s inheritance law (no primogeniture) prevented the consolidation of an indigenous hereditary class of nobility. The nebulous and internally weak Iranian agrarian aristocracy therefore tended to readily compromise with the foreign rule. The combined effects of these factors tended to reduce the intensity of class struggle, while also imparting a popular rather than class character to the few important instances of the outbreak of class warfare, as for example in the Abbasid revolution (mid-8th century), the anti-Mongol Sarbedaran revolt (mid-14th century), and the anti-Turkish uprising of Astarabad (1537–8).

Now let us return to the political riddle of the *uymaq*. For it constituted both the basis of state power and was at the same time its politico-economic parasite. And this of course had no easy solution. The *uymaqs* provided the monarchy (itself initially the largest or the leading *uymaq*) with its military backbone and it was, at least formally, in return for this service that they were ‘granted’ tax-collection rights. On the other hand, no single *uymaq* could successfully challenge the ruling dynasty, as the latter always tended to have better political and larger military resources and manoeuvring position. But this by no means meant that the non-ruling *uymaqs* did not seek ‘national’ supremacy or at least an expanded territory; quite the opposite. In fact one of the main elements of the process of ‘state centralization’, especially under the Safavids, involved the pacification of the aspiring and constantly squabbling *uymaqs*. And this latter characteristic of *uymaqs* rendered them even less reliable as a long-term military structure for any government with ‘national’ and international aspirations (Savory, 1986).

As we have seen, as far as the *uymaqs* were concerned, the exigencies of external political relations, together with their surplus extracting function in the form of non-feudal tributary relations with the subject peasantry, entailed a constant reproduction, if not intensification, of the despotic and patrimonial dimensions of the political authority within the *uymaqs*’ structure; these were, in fact, the *uymaqs*’ *raison d’être*. The same material interests underlying the *uymaqs*’ dynamism generated a similar logic that animated the centralizing state’s attempt to politically transcend the *uymaqs*. This, first and foremost, entailed the creation of an alternative military organization whose members’ allegiance was not mediated through the nomadic tribal structure. For the very socio-political structure of the *uymaq* always tended to render its allegiance unstable and susceptible to fluctuation. The institution of the ‘slave army’ as it emerged in the post-Abbasid Islamic world was essentially the outcome of this geopolitical requirement (cf. Crone, 1980: 74–81).
From the Ghaznavids’ slave army to the Mamluks of Egypt, to the dervshirme of the Ottomans and the ghulaman (slaves) of the Safavids, we encounter a fairly constant compulsion on the part of the originally nomadic states to move towards a politico-military dissociation from their erstwhile military basis, i.e. nomadic tribes. The inherently fragile and unstable tribal allegiance was not a sound basis for any territorially significant state. It had to be replaced with a soldiery characterized by ‘servile status and alien origin’; this combination rendered a slave soldier ‘both personally dependent and culturally dissociated’ (Crone, 1980: 74).

Thus the Safavids founded the ghulaman slave army as the basis of a new military force that owed direct, unconditional and permanent allegiance. The immediate outcome of the creation of the ghulaman forces was a considerable decrease in the political power of the uymaqs. The ghulaman undermined the military monopoly of the uymaqs as slave officers (primarily converted Christian Georgian and Armenian) were appointed to the highest positions within the army, and later to other administrative posts, with the (initially) tacit backing of the members of the Iranian aristocratic and mercantile elites. But this also entailed the question of the upkeep of these new forces. In the absence of a reliable monetary mechanism or any other alternative within the context of a predominantly natural economy, remuneration had inevitably to be based on the royal granting of the right of peasant taxation to the new army. This was later extended to the officials of the primitive but expanding state bureaucracy. This in turn meant a sharp expansion in the size of the khassah (crown lands) at the expense of the divani (state) lands which encroached on the uymaqs’ dominions. This was desirable to the extent that it undermined their political power. But it also progressively increased the political power of the crown and concentrated it in the person of the king as the pre-existing centres of power and political contestation were progressively eradicated or undermined. Consequently, the fate of the state, and society in general, became more and more contingent on the personal traits, whims and caprices of the ruling Shah; the culture of palace coup, fratricide, harem politics and the like were all the products of this process of increasing concentration and personification of political power pushing the patrimonial autocracy to approximate total despotism. But here the crucial point is that grant of land to the military commanders or state officials presupposed the (at least) formal ownership of the lands by the king. This is in fact the real content of the ancient Persian concept of kingship as ‘God’s deputy on earth’ and later Shia Islam’s designation of the Shah as zillollah (God’s shadow on earth) and owner of the all lands.

Obviously centralization was not going to be a linear process. The strong initial opposition by the leading uymaqs aside, the increased size of the crown lands was bound to shrink in the long term. For the growth of land assignment
and tax-farming, with increasingly lax conditions attached to them, meant that
the granted lands over time turned to semi-private property. The chief con-
sequence of this was an inevitable tendency towards political fragmentation. Thus the centralization process led to the unintended outcome of the central-
izing state’s partition of authority and the rise of new socio-political forces
such as the Shia ulama and, to a lesser extent, the bazaar. The corollary of this
process was, of course, the resurgence of the uymaq’s political power and pres-
tige on the basis of their still considerable social cohesion, manpower and mili-
tary capabilities, which eventually animated a new period of dual polity of
uymaqs versus central state, followed by a new round of centralization. In the
Safavid period the reverse process can be traced back to the 1639 peace treaty
with the Ottomans who were, at the time, hard pressed on their European
front. This was accompanied with the growth of land-grants with extremely lax
conditions (Lapidus, 1999: 299). The capture of the Safavid capital of Isfahan
in 1722 by a small force of Ghalzai Afghan nomads and the rapidity of the col-
lapse of the Safavid state (cf. Ramazani, 1966: 19–20) indicate the degenera-
tive tendency inherent in the Safavid centralization process. And finally the
immediate resurgence of uymaq politics represented by the rise of Afshars
(1736–95), Zands (1750–94) and later the Qajars (1779–1925) reveals the
circularity of the whole process.

Conclusion

‘Asian development’, Perry Anderson writes, ‘cannot in any way be reduced
to a uniform residual category, left over after the canons of European evolu-
tion have been established’ (1974: 548–9). The monochromatic history this
‘reduction’ generates is particularly visible in relation to premodern Iran,
whose specificities are conventionally theorized in terms of a generic contrast
with feudal Europe. Overcoming this long-standing problem is, I con-
tended, only possible through transcending the theoretical confines of trad-
tional unitary sociology and its de-internationalized offshoots in historical
sociology. I therefore argued that rather than being an internally generated
characteristic, the lack or underdevelopment of private property in land in
premodern Iran was the outcome of Iran’s continuous interrelation with its
nomadic environs. The resulting state-form was irreducible to either polity;
it had a non-singular character which I conceptualized in terms of what I call
‘amalgamated state formations’: the dynamic, internationally generated com-
bination (and not merely assimilation or external tributary relations) of the
nomadic and agrarian polities in premodern Iran. And it is this concept
which is, in my view, central to the theoretical comprehension of the specific
form and rather enduring characters of the successive premodern Iranian
states, i.e. centralized patrimonial arbitrary rule or ‘sultanism’. And given the
pervasiveness of the nomadic impact in premodern Asia this concept can also be of relevance to rethinking the developmental trajectory of many other Asian societies.

The concept of ‘amalgamated state-formations’ itself is, however, derived from the theory of uneven and combined development which informed my overall analysis. And this theory has, as I indicated in the introduction, broader implications for IR and especially historical sociology in IR. Let us then conclude by looking briefly at these implications.

The problem of the historicity of states and international relations has preoccupied a generation of IR scholars. Beyond the ‘territorial trap’ (Agnew and Corbridge, 1995: ch. 4), Marxist historical sociological approaches within IR have drawn attention to the simultaneous structural political insularity and economic porosity of the modern states’ territoriality as a result of the historically unique capitalist social relations that underpin them (Rosenberg, 1994). The resulting capital–geopolitics relation has, moreover, been conceptualized in terms of the emergence of a ‘transnational class’ hemmed in a ‘Lockean heartland’ whose tendency to internalize its ‘Hobbesian periphery’ is challenged by successive ‘contender’ states inflecting the capitalist globalization (van der Pijl, 1998, 2006).

These invaluable studies — with a few notable exceptions (e.g. Teschke, 2003) — have, however, primarily focused on the nature of international relations in the modern capitalist era and often with an emphasis on the West. Moreover, the fact of the plurality of the modern sovereign territorial states — the geo-economic springboards of the ‘dialectical national-global’ tendencies of modernity (Lacher, 2003) — cannot be derived from capitalist relations themselves (Halliday, 1995: 52; Lacher, 2002). The view that European territorial plurality predates capitalism and was in fact its context of emergence (Lacher, 2002: 161; Teschke, 2002, 2003) is surely theoretically illuminating. But this still leaves the theorization of this putative generative precapitalist ‘international’ unchallenged. For if the plurality of the geopolitical spaces is not co-emergent with capitalism, i.e. it is a transhistorical fact, then the constitutiveness of the international to the internal process of socio-political development cannot be confined to any specific historical period. What we need, as Benno Teschke rightly asserts, is a ‘general and systematic attempt to elevate the international from the start to a constitutive component of any theory of history …’ (2005: 10, cf. Teschke, 2006: 330).

Uneven and combined development represents precisely such an attempt. It posits the international (uneven totality of social reality) as a determinant of the social (expressed as combined development) hence multilinearity of historical development of societies. The form and outcome of this determination, as I argued above, differ from the precapitalist to the capitalist epoch (cf. Rosenberg, 2007: Part I). Uneven and combined development is, however,
not a substitute for historical materialism (or any other social theory for that matter). Rather it essentially demarcates and conceptualizes a causal aspect of social reality (the inter-societal relations) that should not be abstracted from in the theorization of the general socio-historical development. Thus it ontologically construes historical social development as a multilinear but not directionless process. From the perspective of uneven and combined development the international, therefore, becomes neither ‘reduced’ to the social, nor rendered merely an item ‘on loan’ (Cox et al., 2001: 3), nor conceived of as a static field of ‘difference’ to be protected from violent homogenization of ‘modernization’ (Blaney and Inayatullah, 2002). Rather it is conceived of as a distinct, causal and immutable aspect and condition of human sociality’s realization which changes as that realization historically unfolds. The identification of the precise nature and concrete outcomes of this process in each historical period and specific conjuncture, however, require concrete empirical analysis and critical theoretical imagination. This article has served its purpose if it has made a modest contribution towards tackling this formidable task.

**Notes**

1. I would like to thank Conny Beyer, Clemens Hoffmann, Sam Knafo, Justin Rosenberg, Robbie Shilliam, Benno Teschke, Kees van der Pijl and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.
2. In a general sense, the constructivist trend in IR could also be excluded but here I am primarily concerned with historical sociology whose epistemological and theoretical foundations are incommensurable with constructivism’s strong subjectivism (e.g. Wendt, 1992).
3. See (Comninel, 2000) for an excellent statement of a ‘political Marxist’ approach to the subject and its differences with the classical Marxist approach.
5. For a convincing critique of Barry Hindess’ and Paul Hirst’s (1975) argument, which Vali attempts to apply to Iran, see Cook (1976–77). Hindess and Hirst subsequently wrote an ‘auto-critique’ (1977) that obviates dealing with many of Vali’s theoretical contentions here. For a perceptive discussion of the concept of mode of production see Sayer (1987).
6. Wickham’s silence on this matter in his own discussion of the the fall of Roman Empire and the emergence of feudalism (1984: 36) accentuates this same question.
7. There were short-lived, legally unconsolidated forms of private property in many parts of Asia.
9. Here I echo Knei-Paz’s (1978: 63) clarification that in using the term ‘backwardness’, ‘no moral judgement whatever is intended’. For Trotsky, ‘backwardness’ demarcated a ‘clear social and historical uniqueness’ which terms such as ‘less developed’ or ‘under-developed’ do not convey.

10. The classic account of the nomadic–sedentary interaction in the Muslim world is, of course, by Ibn Khaldun in *The Muqaddimah* (1967). There are few studies of premodern Iran which make a case for the nomadic influence on the Iranian polity (cf. Keddie, 1991: 174). They include Helfgott (1977); Katouzian (1981); Reid (1978); Smith (1978). But in these analyses the international still assumes a secondary, contingent role, un-integrated into their overall theoretical framework. In an ambitious but still incomplete work, Kees van der Pijl (2007) attempts to complement the classical concept of mode of production with his concept of ‘mode of foreign relations’ which is applied, *inter alia*, to nomadic–imperial relations.

11. This was, of course, not a unidirectional process. The fact that despite nomadism’s socially ‘egalitarian’, ‘classless’ structure, nomadic states have actually historically emerged can be explained in terms of the geopolitical compulsions under which the nomads lived (Barfield, 1989); they too had to organize vis-à-vis their sedentary neighbours (Krader, 1979: 224). The emergence of the Median Kingdom around 673BC in Iran (Diakonoff, 1985: 89–142) is an interesting instance of this process. At any rate our focus here is the sedentary society.


13. Under the late Safavids *suyurghal* became the main form of *iqta*. It ‘had a perpetual and hereditary character and by its virtue the area held by the grantee formed a kind of autonomous enclave within the state territory’ (Minorsky, 1944: 27).

References


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